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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a course, offered at the University of South Alabama, that was designed to assist occupational therapy students with the transition from student role in an academic environment to entry-level professional role in the work environment by providing World Wide Web-based support to students who leave campus to complete two three-month rotations of clinical fieldwork. Participation in the course was voluntary, and no grades were assigned. Students were invited to participate as needed with their classmates to share resources and information. Resources were provided asynchronously, so students could access them whenever and wherever they could gain access to the Internet to log on to the course. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data was conducted. Data analysis included frequency of participation in the course, the emerging themes discussed in the course, outcome measurements for student performance, and student perceptions based on participation in the course. The information gained during this exploratory study would be useful to assist other faculty in developing similar Web-based support courses. Faculty will gain an awareness of the preparation for and possibilities of using Web-based instruction. The Web-based participation developed in the course may encourage students to later participate in professional Web-based discussions and chats related to their professional associations and/or to be more comfortable in another Web-based course. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/MES)

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Using web-based supports to transition students to professional roles

Abstract

Many college curriculums include an educational component requiring prqctice of knowledge and skills in real world work environments with supervision. These may be known as pre-service, fieldwork, internship, residency, or other descriptors according to the discipline. Students often experience high levels of anxiety about transitioning to these new professional roles. The quality and quantity of on-site supports available to individual students vary with each placement.

A web-based support course was designed to assist students with the transition from student role in an academic environment to entry level professional role in the work environment. Participation in the course was voluntary and no grades were assigned. Students were invited to participate as needed with their classmates to share resources and information. Resources were provided asynchronously so students could access them whenever and wherever they could gain access to the Internet to log on to the course.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data was conducted. Data analysis included frequency of participation in the course, the emerging themes discussed in the course, outcome measurements for student performance, and student perceptions based on participation in the course.

The information gained during this exploratory study would be useful to assist other faculty in developing similar web-based support courses. Faculty will gain an awareness of the preparation for and possibilities of using web-based instruction. The web-based participation developed in this course may encourage students to later participate in

professional web-based discussions and chats related to their professional associations and/or to be more comfortable in another web-based course.

Using web-based supports to transition students to professional roles

The primary objective of most college and university programs is to provide an appropriate education to enable students to successfully enter the work force in professional roles. The change from classroom-based coursework to real life practice-based work is often a stressful experience for students. Academic success does not provide predictability of success in the work place. Many academic programs include a transitional educational component (for example student teaching, medical internships, and therapeutic fieldwork experiences) where students practice application of their new knowledge and are given feedback about their performance from an on-site professional supervisor. It is hoped that these experiences help students further develop their critical thinking skills as well as their professional behaviors in preparation for their career success.

The demands placed on the students to perform successfully in real life environments create new challenges and increases their stress. The thought of working with "real clients or students " while exciting, can be overwhelming to some students. Real world environments present new communication and cultural issues for students to consider. Students may be anxious about confronting the unknown, fear of making errors, unpredictable and stressful situations, and jeopardizing the patient/client relationship (Wong & Wong, 1987). Additionally there is anxiety about the unknown expectations of the on site supervisor. Nursing students surveyed about stress indicated that 67% report being observed by instructors was anxiety producing (Kleehammer, Hart, & Kleck, 1990). Additionally, students may feel vulnerable to the subjective nature of the student/supervisor relationship (Barr, 1980). Students suddenly feel less confident in their knowledge and skills as they anticipate what will be expected of them. Some students also must geographically relocate to complete

this component of their education. The change of address, change in performance expectations, and separation from friends and family members can be overwhelming to some students. The separation from classmates, who may have provided support and collaborative ideas, is hard for some students. The resources that were at the students' fingertips during the academic program may not be readily available in rural sites. All the realities of the professional responsibilities creep into place. The students strive to attain professional behaviors when they are feeling vulnerable and challenged. Many seek to establish rapport with the on site supervisor and may have difficulty separating the supervisory process from friendship.

Carefully examine the issues that your particular students may be facing when completing this part of their educational program. Identifying the stressors and needs of the students is the first step. Once the needs assessment is complete then you can determine possible solutions. Web-based instruction is one option you may consider. Web-based environments are computer based, interactive, non-linear, and multimedia. Web-based instruction allows for creation of interactive learning environments. It allows for interaction between faculty and students, students with students, and can direct students to electronic journals, databases, and multimedia resources (Moore, 1991; Song, 2000). This allows the students to access information as needed, by pass information that is not needed, and direct his/her own learning to access resources and supports within the web design. Learners can study in non-traditional environments on their own schedules, at their convenience.

When considering a web-based course for students you must consider two areas very carefully. Barrow, Jeong, and Parks (1996) contend that accessibility to computers and knowledge of using computers are factors that need to be addressed when examining a

distance education component. They recommend including computer skills into the curriculum to assist the students in gaining these skills. In order, for the web-based course to be convenient for the student, the student must have regular access to a computer, preferably for some amount of uninterrupted time. They need to know how to access the internet, log on and off the system you will use, send and receive e-mail with attachments, and know the basics for communicating asynchronously.

Another factor to consider is the expertise of the faculty and the resources your university provides to faculty. The first time a web- based course is developed, it will take up a considerable amount of time from the faculty member. Resources for back up supports in case of technological problems both for the instructor and the student are essential. Instructors should specify the technological requirements at the onset of the course for students and arrange for technological support to minimize student distress (Essex & Cagiltay, 2001). Technological limitations noted in the literature include limited availability of hardware and software, unreliable Internet providers, and incompatible files (Cornell, 1999, Wiens & Gunter, 1998). The faculty must acquire new knowledge and skills to shift roles to a facilitator of the learning process rather than a content expert (Brill, 2001).

A joint venture between the Institute for Higher Education Policy, the National Education Association, and Blackboard, Inc. has identified benchmarks to ensure excellence in Internet based distance learning (National Education Association, 2000). They include the areas of institutional support, course development, teaching/learning, course structure, student support, faculty support and evaluation and assessment. Faculty should utilize these benchmarks when creating a web-based course.

The University of South Alabama, Department of Occupational Therapy decided to offer an optional web-based support course for occupational therapy students who leave campus to complete two, three-month rotations of clinical fieldwork. First computer accessibility was determined by having each student complete a questionnaire. All students reported they had access to a computer with Internet. Second, computer skills were considered adequate since all students completed two required computer courses during their academic program. The next consideration was the content of the course. Students completed questionnaires that asked them to rank order the content and supports they wanted provided by the web-based course. The web-based support course was created with the following information considered:

1. Asynchronous communication would be used to allow time and flexibility in communication since students were on various work schedules and in different time zones,
2. A list serve group that was free was used to allow communication to everyone, mi: imize costs, and allow for restricted membership,
3. Students were granted freedom to communicate and discuss cases and experiences surrounding the fieldwork experiences with each other and with the faculty,
4. Students were interested in sharing information with each other that included good web sites, documentation samples, and time management strategies, and
5. Students wanted positive inspirational saying to keep them motivated during this experience and help them feel less stressed and less isolated from each other.

A pilot course was created for the fall semester- September to December 2000. The format for this course was voluntary participation without grades. The purpose of the course was to provide supports to help students be successful on the clinical fieldwork rotations. The web-

based course was designed to provide social and emotional supports to students, to promote critical thinking skills relevant to the profession, and to encourage sharing of resources and information to promote student self-development. Students were encouraged to seek ideas and resources from their classmates using web-based asynchronous formats. One faculty member monitored the discussions and provided appropriate guidance as needed. Other faculty members were available and participated as desired.

The e-groups list serve was utilized for the format of the course communication. This provided a template which included restricted invitation only enrollment to maintain group integrity and confidentiality, it allowed group and individual e-mail, it had a calendar component to provide information about academic deadlines, and it allowed for posting and sharing of links and files. Asynchronous communication was permitted between faculty and students and student-to-students. Students were invited to join the group while still attending on campus courses to allow time to help any that needed assistance with the set up.

All twenty-three class members were invited to participate in the web-based support course. Students could use any Internet ready computer to participate in the course since they had their passwords and log on information. Eighteen out of 23 (78%) students participated in the web-based course. Five students reported a variety of computer problems interfering with their participation in the course such as computer malfunctions and limited computer access secondary to geographical relocation. The messages shared over the e-groups course were copied, saved to disk, printed out, and coded to determine the themes, which emerged from the data.

During the twelve weeks, there was a diverse amount of participation among the members. Each member was given a code and tracked for the number of e-mail contributions he/she sent

to the course as a measure of course participation. All messages from Sept. 25- Dec.24th were utilized. A total of 185 messages were noted; twenty-four were the initial logging in, leaving 161 messages to review. Messages that were duplicates (sent twice) or empty (no message) were not counted. The first two weeks of the course were not coded since these were the initial logging on and each one contained a positive good luck wish for the rest of the class and promise to keep in touch. Some students even thanked the faculty member for making this available to them. The highest number of messages sent by one student was twenty-five, followed by nineteen. Both of these students were in remote locations, out of town, and were the only OT student on site. This illustrates that these students who were isolated, did participate the most in the web-based course to maintain contacts with their classmates and to gain support. The range of messages from the rest of the class was from one to fourteen.

The students were encouraged by the instructor to submit patient cases for discussion, provide ideas for patient treatment, and to share two good quality web site URL addresses they found helpful. The content of e-mail messages allowed students to keep up with each other's lives as they reported their personal changes as well such as pregnancy, engagements, break ups, and family illness. The faculty responded to the information on family illness by contacting the individual students and the clinical sites involved to help coordinate flexible schedules to allow students to be with their families during crisis and return to their clinical sites to make up time. This opportunity to negotiate on behalf of the student may have been missed without the sharing of this in the web-based course.

The content of the e-mail messages were saved to disk and analyzed for themes using the Nud*ist Program. Several themes emerged from the data. The e-mails were coded into seven categories- support of classmates, personal experiences, social information, informative,

patient treatment, website sharing, and research. The content of the messages reveals the following order of use:

1. Patient Treatment (23%)

   Specific treatment ideas for cases, suggestions, literature review summaries, sharing of resources

2. Personal Experiences (18%)

   Story telling, what happened to them, funny stories to share, unusual opportunities they had that week

3. Support of Classmates (11%)

   Supportive e-mails, words of encouragement

4. Information (9.7%)

   This was mainly information sent to the students from the University of South Alabama reminding them about scheduling for next semester, events they needed to know about, exam information, and other relevant information. This was a fast way to disseminate the information.

5. Social Information (2.6%)

   Planning social events, phone number changes, get together plans, visiting each other information

6. Research Project (2.8%)

   Students were working on research projects and sharing of ideas, problems, and resources were communicated.

7. Website Information (1.3%)

Sharing of the URL addresses for good informative websites so classmates could check them out.

This data is supportive that the format of a web-based course was able to provide the students with additional information, support and encouragement for success on fieldwork, calendar reminders of deadlines, and use of the web for expanding educational opportunities.

The negatives

One issue that arose was the limited participation and lack of participation by some classmates. This made some students feel like they were contributing and doing more for their classmates than they were getting back in return. Unfortunately there was some truth to this, since participation was voluntary, and some offered much more to their classmates than others. Others reported missing the classmates that were not participating. Other reported negatives consisted of time limitations to read all the e-mail messages, technology problems (difficulty accessing the links, lack of internet access), and individual replies that were broadcast to all group members.

A variety of technological skills and hardware made it difficult for some students to access the links section and files section of the course. To accommodate these individuals, we did a dual posting. Web sites were posted in an e-mail message so these students could receive them, then placed in the links folders. A questionnaire was placed in the file section of the course, and since some students could not open it, it was sent out in the body of e-mail as well. It seems we were able to accommodate these individuals well.

Outcomes Measure

There were twenty-one students who completed the three-month clinical fieldwork during the Fall 2000 semester. Two other students who participated in the course were on alternative

schedules. Each of the twenty-one students (100%) passed their first clinical rotation. The mean scores as recorded by the standard form the Fieldwork Evaluation Form for the Occupational Therapist (FWE) for the Class of 2001 (AOTA, 1987) are compared to the means of previous years (See Figure 1). The class that participated in the web-based support course (Class of 2001) was more successful than the previous year. The scores in all three areas- performance, judgement and attitude showed marked improvements. The mean scores are moving up higher and closer to scores achieved by some of the previous classes. This is exactly what we hoped to achieve.

Post-Questionnaires

At completion of the Fall On-Line Course, students were asked to complete a questionnaire about their experiences. Nine students out of the eighteen participants (50%) responded to the questionnaire. The students were asked in December if they wanted to keep the web-based support course going for the next three months while they were at their second clinical fieldwork. The overwhelming response was yes! One student who was not able to send e-mail called to inform me she was benefiting from receiving the e-mail information. A couple other students called to say they were looking forward to being able to join in since at their next site they would be able to have their computers and wanted to participate. We agreed to keep the on-line support course in place for spring 2001. The students reported the most helpful components of the web-based course to be:

100% reported feeling more connected with the USA-OT Department and their classmates via the on-line support course.

75% links to educational and informative sites

50% ideas and suggestions from classmates

50% hearing about other classmates experiences at sites

25% staying in touch/support with classmates

25% calendar date reminders

Additionally the students made suggestions to include the following:

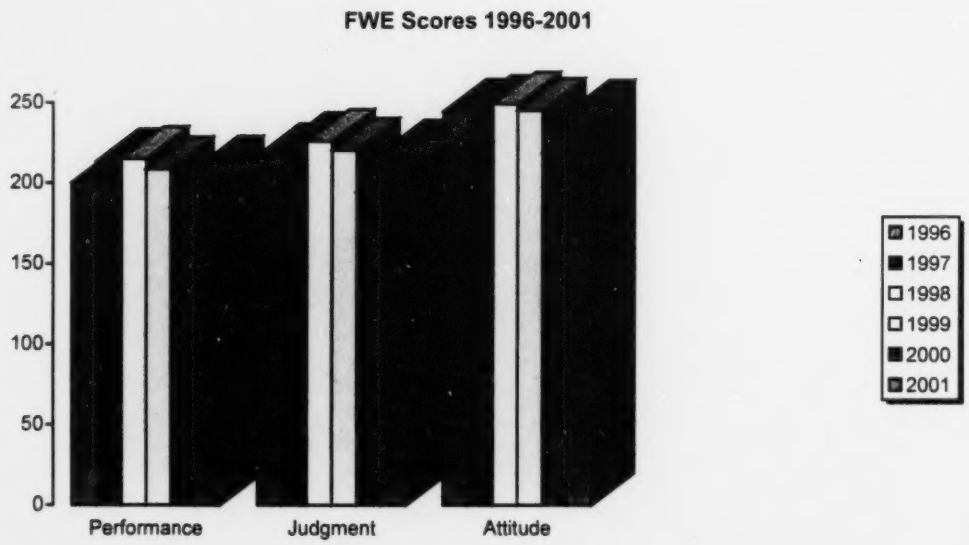
- reference lists of materials student found helpful on fieldwork
- more structured assignments to post on the site
- a creation of a generic checklist that students could check to indicate they performed a task so others could know who to ask about those procedures
- participation in a synchronous chat room

Summary

The qualitative and quantitative data and the supporting opinions of the students all point to a successful web-based support course. Of course there were the usual technological difficulties experienced by some students. Overall, it seems that students who were isolated and/or in need of supports were able to use the web-based course to seek what they needed from their classmates and the faculty. The table below illustrates an analysis of how each perceived need identified by our needs assessment was met by the web-based course (See Table 1). It appears that the web-based course was on target for meeting these intended needs. Sharing of strategies for patient treatment was the most highly communicated content. This seems appropriate since this hands on skill is the component the OTS are practicing the most during clinical fieldwork rotations. Students chose to participate in this web-based course and communicated a desire to continue this communication into the next three-month rotation as well. Despite the fact that there was no grade or assignments required, students participated willingly and utilized the web-based course to promote their self-development.

Table 1-Needs and Outcomes

Need	Did the web-based course meet this need?	How?
Treatment Ideas	Yes 23% of content shared on line	Students posted a variety of treatment ideas to some specific common needs. Students presented specific cases and others helped them problem solve. Some links provided treatment ideas as well.
Links to informative web sites with accurate information	Yes 1.3 % of content	Faculty contributed links Students contributed links Creation of folders for variety of sites
Calendar date reminders for documentation	Yes Part of information sent to students on-line	Calendar reminders programmed into course Students reported liking these e-mail messages Saved faculty from chasing down students Cheaper for OT Dept.
Support students by remaining in contact and providing encouragement	Yes 11%	Students supported each other and had a faculty member to access Faculty stepped in to help those in crisis.Everyone more aware of each others experiences and needs
Professional development and sharing of success tips	Yes-Part of personal experiences and research	Websites lead to new information Research conducted on site was professional development opportunity Personal/funny stories
Tips for managing time in the clinic	Yes 18% Part of personal experiences	Students shared personal stories that included this information Students compared expectations of what they were doing and what other students were doing to manage time


FWE Scores 1996-2001
250
200
150
100
50
0
Performance
Judgment
Attitude
1996
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001

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